

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 240 581

CS 208 129

AUTHOR Morrissey, Thomas J.
TITLE Audience, Purpose, and Persona in Student Writing.
PUB DATE [83]
NOTE 14p.; This paper is based on a workshop conducted at the Current Trends in Reading Conference (4th, Plattsburgh, NY, October 17, 1983).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audi~~o~~graph Analysis; Education Work Relationship; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; Teaching Methods; Textbook Evaluation; Writing (Composition); *Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Audience Awareness; *Persona

ABSTRACT

In the "real" world of writing, people make writing decisions based in part on their analyses of audience expectations and their own purposes. Yet, composition teachers at all levels assign general or abstract topics for essays rather than create writing tasks that require students to reflect on target audiences. Even students are aware of the kinds of audiences and purposes they are likely to encounter beyond the classroom: the audience, purpose, and persona are essential parts of any writing task. Although many traditional textbooks offer little guidance to students or teachers as to how these elements figure within the writing process, a number of new books view the problem as central, including "Successful Writing" by Maxine Hairston and "Writing to Communicate" by Maureen Taylor. It is possible to create classroom writing tasks that force students to consider audience, purpose, and persona. However, helping students learn to invent and intervening in their writing process to promote invention and development are also part of teaching audience awareness. (A sample assignment that allows students to choose from lists of topics or purposes and audiences is included.) (HTH)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED240581

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

- ☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- ☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

AUDIENCE, PURPOSE, AND PERSONA IN STUDENT WRITING

by

Dr. Thomas J. Morrissey
Associate Professor of English
Writing Skills Coordinator
State University of New York
College of Arts and Science
Plattsburgh, N.Y. 12901

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Thomas J. Morrissey

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 208 129

Audience, Purpose and Persona in Student Writing

Last summer I was invited to talk about writing at a reading conference.* Worse yet, I was told that my audience would consist of elementary and secondary teachers rather than college instructors. Immediately, fish-out-of-water syndrome set in: what did I, a college English professor, have to say about writing to grade school English and reading teachers who were obviously interested in reading but not necessarily in writing, and, how could I avoid sounding (or feeling as though I were sounding) like a higher-ed know-it-all preaching to the underlings? The predicament presented its own solution. What I was faced with was a classic example of the problem of how to reconcile audience, purpose and persona. Since I spend so much time trying to make my own freshman composition students come to grips with the problem, and since I believe that it might well be the most important thing I teach them, my mind was made up: I would assume that no one would come who wasn't interested in teaching writing. I would tell them one of the most important things I've learned about teaching composition, and I would address them as a fellow toiler in the writing classroom.

What the foregoing narrative is designed to illustrate is how a seasoned professional can be temporarily reduced to a state of trepidation akin to that experienced by many writing students facing a new essay assignment and how the only way out for that professional was to consider the interrelationship between his audience, purpose and persona or voice. What I ended up telling them and what I am telling you is something of what I have learned through research and experience about this crucial interrelationship.

When was the last time you were asked to write a concise, well-organized

*This paper is based on a workshop conducted at the Fourth Annual Current Trends in Reading Conference, Plattsburgh, N.Y., October 17, 1983.

essay on the topic, "What I Did on My Summer Vacation" or "Define 'Liberty'"? You were probably in school. And, unless you were one of those resourceful and talented students with a natural flair for expression, you probably had a lot of trouble writing the essay. Even if you were one of the gifted few, your essay was probably so much light weight debris in the vacuum of audienceless, purposeless schoolroom prose.

Think about what and why you write now. If you are writing to Uncle Gus thanking him for the inedible holiday fruitcake he sent or if you are composing for the Dean recommendations for a new testing program, you know your subject and your audience and you know that your purpose can be accomplished only if you use what you know about them. Outside in the so-called real world of business and public affairs, people make decisions about writing based in part on their analyses of their audience's expectations and their own purposes. The politician who must justify a junket to Tahiti as vital to the national interest chooses a persona with great care. Hence the self-evident fact: you can't write effectively without knowing your audience and purpose and without choosing a persona congruent with them.¹

So why do so many teachers at all levels of composition assign general or abstract topics for essays rather than creating writing tasks that require students to reflect on the target audience? There are a number of reasons--some good, some not. A bad reason is that things have always been done this way. A good reason is that designing assignments that challenge students to consider their audiences and the purposes for which they are addressing them is a difficult task for some instructors. Some even believe that the task isn't possible, that exercises in audience definition are always artificial and that teachers have no reason to expect that they can do any better than play make-believe when they think they are introducing reality into the classroom.²

There may be some truth to the reason just cited, but some truth isn't all

truth, and even an artificial attempt at defining audience and purpose is better than no attempt. One way to arrive at this conclusion is to ask students what they expect to be writing when they are no longer students. The accompanying table³ (see Table I) illustrates that students generally find conventional audienceless assignments a dead end. In each of the six categories of respondents--from high school students to teachers attending the 1980 New York State English Council Conference--there are two numbers. The first is the percentage of respondents who are currently engaged in each of the writing tasks in the left hand column. The second number represents the number of respondents who expect to be engaging in the various writing tasks in 15 years. Notice that 95% of the high school students write "compositions for school" (it looks like 5% don't write compositions, even though all respondents come from an English class). Yet only 9% expect to write compositions in the future. The high school students do expect to write business letters (73%), job applications (64%), memos (32%) and newspaper articles (28%). Judging from the responses from column 5--professional people in a small upstate New York city--the students are correct. 92% of the "real world" people write business letters, 78% memos, 38% job applications and 15% newspaper articles. Nearly half of this group still write "compositions," but these are more likely to be graduate seminar papers having little resemblance to the high school students' essays.

The fact is that the high school students have some idea--errant as it might be in some categories--of what kinds of audiences and purposes they are likely to encounter out there in the world beyond school. Although it would be foolish to suggest that lab reports, for example, should be abolished because students don't expect to write them in the future, it would be equally foolish not to capitalize on the students' beliefs that there is a greater long term pay-off in excelling in certain writing tasks for certain audiences.

In developing writing assignments, teachers can control one or more of the

five principal elements that form the foundation of any piece of writing--the audience, the purpose, the writer's persona, the subject matter, and the mode (as defined by Kinneavy). Of these possible choices, selecting the mode or subject alone is probably the most conducive to bad essay responses, and they are probably the most common choices. Who in the real world ever writes a comparison-contrast essay without first deciding that that is, in fact, the most suitable structural technique? Who sits down to write about a subject without considering who will read the piece of writing? (Remember that even writing for personal consumption has an audience: the writer).

The audience, purpose and persona, then, seem essential parts of any writing task. It would appear that teaching students to make judicious choices in these areas is of primary importance in preparing them to write in a world where audience and purpose form the backbone of writing.

When one begins to think about writing as having a purpose, an awareness of the role of audience and persona tends to follow. James Kinneavy's pioneering effort at describing aims and modes in A Theory of Discourse has influenced many teachers to consider purpose when formulating assignments. Kinneavy's book is rather complex and his own terminology has evolved over the years,⁴ so I will present the scheme of purposes derived (no doubt with a great debt to Kinneavy) by Eckhardt and Stewart. According to them, there are four general purposes:

1. To clarify what the subject is (to define a word, to explain a concept, to report evidence);
2. To substantiate a thesis about the subject (to demonstrate that an inference or conclusion about it is valid);
3. To evaluate the subject (to judge it as good or bad with reference to utilitarian, ethical, or aesthetic standards);
4. To recommend that something be done about the subject (to persuade people to think or act differently about it)⁵

These are purposes, not methods of organization or exposition. A process analysis, for example, could, depending on the writer's intention, be the substance or a

significant portion thereof of an essay exhibiting any of these four purposes. The process might be the yardstick for evaluation or it might be a necessary adjunct to a report of findings. The depiction of a process might be an important prop in defense of an idea. Finally, demonstrating how a process is abused might well be useful in spurring readers to action. These four purposes seem to encompass the principal reasons why anyone writes what Kinneavy calls referential discourse.

But what is missing from this schema is the "for whom?" in each case. Who is to weigh the evaluation or thesis substantiation? For whom are the findings reported? Whose attitudes need changing? The audience reading the message, what Kinneavy calls the decoder of the messages, is a vital consideration.⁶ Could anyone make sense out of these purposes without asking these basic audience-related questions? Only when the purpose and the audience are identified can one seriously consider the voice or persona of the piece of writing. How could one possibly know what a piece should sound like or what pose to strike without first having an audience or purpose in mind?

What happens when composition assignments are left sufficiently open-ended so that students must, without any prompting to do so, conceive of their own audiences? Often, the result is compositionese, the boring, stilted, cliché-ridden prose students associate with English classes. When an essay is assigned, there are many possible audience-purpose-persona combinations a student might select; all too often, however, the student writes for "the teacher," that neutral and nit-picking audience of one.

In order to demonstrate to teachers just how open-ended topics could be, I gave a group of 30 teachers at the reading conference to which I referred earlier, a list of topics selected from "A Thousand Topics for Composition: Revised," Illinois English Bulletin (January 1971). Accompanying the list was a form entitled "Audience-Purpose-Persona Analysis." Participants were asked to write succinct

descriptions of a possible intended audience, purpose, and persona from each of two of the topics from "A Thousand and One Topics." There is no efficient way to tabulate the results, but here is an example from their responses:

Topic: "If Television Lived Up to its Possibilities"

Respondent A

Audience: Parents
 Purpose: To educate parents so that they may monitor their children's time spent watching T.V.
 Persona: Instructional, logical with emphasis on what value can be gotten from supervising T.V. habits.

Respondent B

Audience: Program officer from a funding agency, who is charged with reading proposals asking for funds to develop new T.V. programming.
 Purpose: To convince the program officer to give you money.
 Persona: Factual and forceful

Respondent C

Audience: Local cable TV service
 Purpose: To persuade them to change the times of PG movies.
 Persona: Imperative.

Respondent D

Audience: T.V. technicians/researchers
 Purpose: To stimulate research into higher resolution electron guns for picture tubes.
 Persona: Knowledgeable and challenging--build on audience's desire to emulate T.V. pioneers, e.g., Alfred Dumont, etc.

Each of these is a valid response to the topic, but I suspect that very few students not trained to consider a wide range of audiences and situations would ever think of any of them. Each respondent posits a possible real-world audience, each has a clear purpose, and each has a reasonably clear notion of how the finished product might sound. How many writing teachers would be pleased to be able to say these things about the majority of the essays they read every week?

Although many traditional textbooks offer little guidance to students or teachers as to how audience, purpose, and persona figure into the writing process, a number of

new books view the problem as central. Take, for instance, these instructions offered by Maxine Hairston in Successful Writing:

As part of each assignment, write a one-paragraph analysis of your audience, including a statement about where your paper would be published and what your readers would want to know, a one-paragraph analysis of your purpose in writing, and a two-or three-sentence analysis of the persona you want to project in your writing.⁷

One freshman level text that skillfully weaves this same idea into pre-writing assignments is Maureen Taylor's Writing to Communicate (Wadsworth, 1983). And, fortunately, there are others as well, including those that take the casebook approach.

It is quite possible to create writing tasks that force students to consider the elements I have been talking about. What follows is an essay assignment requiring the students to accomplish the fourth of Eckhardt and Stewart's purposes, persuasion. In this assignment, the purpose and audience should be clear to students before they actually begin writing anything close to a complete draft. The persona may evolve more slowly. The reason that choices are provided is that they focus attention on the need to select among alternatives. Furthermore, when we discuss the drafts or finished essays in class, the students are exposed to a variety of voices and situations of their own making. Hence, there is no one magic way to do the assignment:

Compose a concise, coherent and persuasive essay after having selected a topic, purpose, and audience from the options below. You must select on your own the persona or voice, the tone, and the method of argumentation.

Column A
Topic/Purpose

Column B
Audiences

Convince an audience that

a) they should or shouldn't read a certain magazine

b) nudity and/or profanity should or shouldn't be banned from TV (free or pay TV)

c) a particular newspaper or magazine should add or drop a certain feature

d) they should or shouldn't watch a certain type of television program

1. men over 18
2. girls 13-17
3. any special interest group

1. aparent teacher association
2. TV network executive
3. elected official

1. newspaper/magazine editor
2. readers of chosen publication

1. young people, 10-14
2. college students
3. adults 25 and over

The survey summarized in Table I suggests that students have some notions about which kinds of writing will be of use to them in the future. The types they select readily lend themselves to the audience-purpose-persona analysis approach, since several of the types are audience or career specific. The instructor who capitalizes on students' perceptions of their futures as writers is likely to see a higher level of motivation than one is accustomed to in freshman comp. courses. Furthermore, if instructors make an effort to learn what kinds of writing instructors in other disciplines require of their students, then audience analysis can become a basis of improving writing across the curriculum.

Lest it sound as though I am pushing one approach as a panacea or technique sine qua non, let me express some important reservations and conditions. It is, of course, true that some instructors and more students will not know much about the audiences selected for specific assignments; therefore, some assignments won't work. If they don't, then don't use them again. A greater concern is that most English

instructors would like their students to recognize a higher purpose in writing than simply satisfying an immediate utilitarian objective. The more important goal of helping students develop a sense of writing as a vital and distinctively human activity should never be ignored. Linda Flower's work with writer based prose clearly shows what a liberating experience good writing instruction can be. Helping students learn to invent and intervening in their writing process to promote invention and development are absolute prerequisites to the teaching of audience awareness. Francis Bacon was certainly as (if not more) keenly aware of his audience as the executive who writes a memo on absenteeism, and, because of their inventive discursiveness Bacon's essays are a lot more fun to read than corporate correspondence, at least as far as most English teachers are concerned. But the universe of discourse is immense in scope, and instructors who teach students to think about who besides the English teacher might ever read student prose is giving them an important lesson.

State University College
Plattsburgh, New York

Table I: Writing Tasks Today and Fifteen Years in the Future

	1		2		3		4		5		6	
	H.S. Students Age 15		Freshman Develop- mental Writing Course		Regular Freshman Writing Course		Junior/Senior Level Writing Course		Local Professionals		NYSEC Audience	
Personal Letters	77	73	84	78	87	83	96	80	85	78	76	76
Business Letters Ltrs. to Officials	14	73	0	78	4	65	28	80	92	92	94	88
Compositions for School	95	9	89	0	61	9	100	4	46	15	35	18
Lab Reports	37	5	67	22	61	9	28	4	0	0	11	0
Newspaper Articles (local)	5	18	17	56	4	43	16	32	15	30	65	53
Newspaper Articles (city)	0	28	0	56	4	61	4	24	8	8	6	18
Job Applications	37	64	61	50	61	52	72	52	38	30	53	35
Diaries	23	9	61	11	61	18	64	40	38	30	55	47
Stories	14	0	39	33	48	26	16	16	30	28	53	53
Song Lyrics	0	18	17	50	22	13	4	4	23	30	6	6
Sermons	9	5	11	50	0	30	0	0	0	8	0	0
Speeches	68	18	56	39	26	48	32	52	30	30	41	47
Memos	9	32	17	78	18	61	16	56	78	70	82	65
Books and Articles in Prof. Field	9	32	11	67	9	43	4	40	8	54	55	65

NOTES

¹Of course, considering the audience is not the same as pleasing it; one's purpose might well be to antagonize an audience. In any event, this discussion is limited to the role of audience-purpose-persona interrelationship in referential discourse. Expressive writing has its own special audience concerns.

²A lively debate over this issue can be found in the Bait-Rebait section of the January 1983 English Journal, pp. 14-17. Irvin Y. Hashimoto dismisses the importance and efficacy of audience analysis. Linda S. Flower believes as I do that such analysis is a fruitful pedagogical technique.

³Table I previously appeared in Thomas J. Morrissey and Barry Maid, "The Real and Perceived Needs of Student Writers and Graduate Professionals: A Mimetic Approach to Helping Student Writers," ERIC ED 198 551.

⁴For a cogent reassessment of Kinneavy's theory, see William J. McCleary, "Does Expository Writing Exist? No," English Journal, 71:7 (1982), pp. 65-67.

⁵Caroline D. Eckhardt and David H. Stewart, "Towards a Functional Taxonomy of Composition," CCC, 30:4 (1979), pp. 338-342.

⁶James Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse, (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 19.

⁷Maxine Hairston, Successful Writing: A Rhetoric for Advanced Composition (New York: Norton, 1981), p. 57.